

Israel: Mitchell's diplomacy stalls over settlement freeze

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The actions of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have succeeded in exposing the falsity of all claims that the Obama administration offers a road towards a settlement with the Palestinians.

US Middle East envoy George Mitchell has been forced to extend his trip to Israel until Friday, having reached no agreement with Netanyahu on a pledge to freeze settlement construction.

Mitchell arrived in Israel Sunday, expecting to discuss with Netanyahu Monday. But the meeting was delayed so both could attend the funeral of Israeli Air Force pilot, Captain Asaf Ramon, the son of Israel's first and only astronaut, Ilan Ramon, who was killed in the 2003 Columbia space shuttle disaster.

The previous week saw a series of Israeli announcements spelling out a massive programme of housing construction on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem that, on the surface, repudiate repeated demands by Washington for a settlement freeze.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak authorized the construction of 455 housing units in six West Bank settlements. This was the first government-approved construction project in the West Bank since Netanyahu came to power in March. Following this announcement, the government announced that it had chosen developers to build nearly 500 new apartments in Pisgat Zeev, a Jewish neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. The government also stated that it intends to complete work on another 3,000 houses already under construction.

Israel's official justification for the construction projects is that it wants to keep the six West Bank settlements, including Har Gilo, Modiin Illit and Ariel, as part of any agreement with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu's spokesman, Mark Regev, said of the East Jerusalem construction project, "While the government of Israel is prepared, in order to get the peace process moving, to consider serious restrictions on growth in West Bank settlements, this does not apply to Jerusalem, which is our capital and will remain so."

Taken together the plans confirm that Israel will not tolerate the creation of even a truncated Palestinian entity. The West Bank settlements effectively divide it in two, while the Palestinians claim East Jerusalem as the capital of any future state. Already close to 500,000 Jews live in more than 100 settlements built since the occupation that followed the 1967 war.

On the day Mitchell arrived, Netanyahu was in Egypt, seeking the agreement of President Hosni Mubarak to tone down any complaints regarding Israeli settlements. He was well placed to do so, given the profound crisis gripping the ageing Mubarak's regime.

On Monday, prior to the funeral, Netanyahu then spoke to a specially convened meeting of the foreign affairs and defence committee. He used the occasion to publicly reject a freeze on settlements. He would consider suspending new plans to build in the West Bank, but only for a limited time. The 3,000 housing units already begun would be completed, he added.

This left Mitchell to engage in a meeting Tuesday with Netanyahu, in which he reportedly appealed for a one year "freeze," as opposed to the six months slow-down offered by Israel. He then met with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, in an effort to keep on track a planned three-party summit involving Netanyahu and President Barack Obama at the United Nations General Assembly in New York next week.

Even the pliant Palestinian Authority regime will have extraordinary difficulty in justifying its continued efforts to accommodate Washington and Tel Aviv. Spokesperson Hanan Ashrawi of Abbas's party, Fatah, said, "What Netanyahu is doing is clearly at the scale of a grand deception. He thinks that he can deceive the rest of the world...but what he is doing under a variety of pretexts is the continuation of settlements and at the same time demanding a price in return."

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said the meeting between Mitchell and Abbas did not even discuss the

possibility of a tripartite meeting. Earlier he stated, “People are asking the Americans now: If you could not convince the Israelis to stop settlement activity, will anybody in the Arab and Islamic world believe you can make Israel return to the ‘67 borders or withdraw from settlements?”

Mitchell met with Netanyahu again yesterday, but there was no report of the discussions. The two will meet again tomorrow. It may be that Friday’s meeting will end in some announcement of a concession having been wrested from Netanyahu, such as an extension of his freeze on “new construction” to nine months. But should it materialize, this will be as meaningless as previous concessions—allowing negotiations to continue while Israel consolidates its penetration of the West Bank and its grip on East Jerusalem.

In a June speech at Bar Ilan University, billed as a response to Obama’s June 4 Cairo address calling for the creation of a Palestinian state and the end of new settlements, for example, Netanyahu insisted that the establishment of a Palestinian “state” was dependent upon a series of Israeli demands that in reality made a state impossible. These included recognition of Israel as “the state of the Jewish people,” eliminating the right of return for Palestinian refugees, the de-militarisation of any Palestinian entity, “defensible borders” for Israel, including Jerusalem remaining its “united capital” and positioning its troops along the western side of the Jordan River, no freeze on settlements, that Fatah oust Hamas from Gaza, and that Israel controls Palestinian airspace.

Israel’s demands offered the Palestinians even less than was formally put on the table with the so-called Road Map drawn up under President Bush. Yet Obama dutifully hailed Netanyahu’s speech as an “important step forward” towards a Palestinian state, signalling “Prime Minister Netanyahu’s endorsement of that goal.”

The media has concentrated on the embarrassment suffered by Washington due to Israel’s rejection of a settlement freeze, but there is no explanation of why Netanyahu has felt able to so publicly defy the US. As Ben Lynfield wrote in the *Scotsman*, “What is unclear is why Washington, which demanded a full settlement freeze, negotiations on core issues, and a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is not using its leverage with Israel.”

The fact is that Obama’s efforts to proclaim advances made towards a Palestinian state are dictated by a desire to secure the backing of the Arab regimes for a broader Middle East policy, centred on curbing Iran as a regional power. But as much as the US seeks to cultivate Arab support against Iran, Washington remains dependent on Israel—not only to spearhead any possible military action against Tehran but more broadly to act as a reliable strongman in the region.

The US is fully aware that Netanyahu has no intention of

agreeing to a meaningful settlement with the Palestinians. The Democrats’ protests against his actions are for the record—in order to appear to be fighting in the Palestinian’s corner when they are in fact collaborating with their Israeli oppressors.

Continued settlement construction was agreed by the US before Mitchell’s arrival, according to a report in *Haaretz*. Its September 6 edition noted Netanyahu’s confidence that a final agreement would be reached with Mitchell. It then wrote, “Ministers and MKs (parliamentarians) who spoke with Netanyahu and his associates told *Haaretz* that the prime minister showed them the final agreement reached with the US administration on suspending settlement construction. A source in the Prime Minister’s Office said Netanyahu did not use the word ‘moratorium’ or ‘freeze,’ opting instead to describe the proposed measure as ‘reducing the scale of construction.’”

Haaretz is what passes for a liberal publication in Israel. It is, however, full of praise for Netanyahu’s handling of negotiations with the US over the Palestinians. It editorialised on September 10, “While the US president’s wings melt, the Israeli prime minister is slowly growing his own. Day by day and week by week, Netanyahu is moving away from the demonic image that had been attached to him and is fortifying his status as the legitimate Israeli captain of this time....

“Three months after being announced to the world, the Bar-Ilan formula is clearly working.... Within a very short amount of time, Netanyahu has managed to redefine the peace process. Now it is clear to all that the burden of proof and contribution not only rests on Israel’s shoulders, but also on the Palestinians, the Arab states and the international community. After Olmert and Livni gave everything without receiving anything, Netanyahu is conducting a reasonable, mature policy.”



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